

Jack Rodney Robertson (1917–2015): IUGA loses its second founding father

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Jack Roberston died on 1 April 2015 surrounded by his family and clergy, laughing and praying when his great heart gave out. He was just shy of his 98th birthday.

Jack was born 13 May 1917, in Boise, ID, USA to Denie and Vallie (Lowmiller) Robertson. Early on, he decided he wanted to be a doctor. In summer, he worked at the ski resort in Sun Valley, ID, where he met movie stars and other famous people. He attended George Washington Medical School in Washington, DC, during which time he operated a remote elevator in the Capitol Building. Senators called him Doc and made sure he had time to study and plenty to eat.

Jack graduated from medical school in 1950 and took his obstetrics and gynecology residency at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA, under the leadership of Dr. Conrad Collins, who made a place for him when Yankees (northerners) were not accepted. Under Collins' mentorship, Jack's training included the female urinary tract, which became his special interest.

Jack served in the US Air Force during the Korean War and was stationed at Provo Air Base. After his residency, he established his private practice on the campus of Stanford University in Palo Alto, CA. There he met his future bride, Janice Cunningham Fitzgerald, who was a widow with four children (Noel, Larry, Peter, and Gerry). They were married 3 November 1956. Jack adopted Janice's children, who took the Robertson name. Robert Ahearn, an orphaned nephew of



Janice's sister, joined the family, and together Jack and Janice had three children: Andrea (born in Palo Alto), Tara (born in Watsonville), and Bruce (born in Santa Barbara).

Early on in his career, Jack realized that women with pelvic floor disorders were being treated unfairly. There were no instruments for examining a woman's urinary tract; instruments used to examine the male urinary tract were being used. In 1968, Jack met with Karl Storz in Germany and convinced him to make a 4-mm-diameter female urethroscope through which he could introduce carbon dioxide. This instrument, the Robertson Female Urethroscope, fits into an airtight handle, through which CO₂ is insufflated.

Jack also realized that most gynecologists and urologists had little training in female genitourinary disorders, so with his wife, he organized weekend seminars for gynecologists, which he taught all over the world. Jack also began organizing many symposia and workshops for both the American College of Surgeons and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

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In 1976, at the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) meeting in Mexico City, Mexico, Jack and Professor Axel Ingelman Sundberg from Sweden, colleagues and old-time friends, invited a group of nine colleagues to establish a new society called the International Urogynecological Association (IUGA). In 1979, Jack became founding father of the association and the first president of the Gynecologic Urology Society (GUS), which soon changed its name to the American Urogynecologic Society (AUGS).

Jack was a clinical professor and taught gynecologic interns in the medical schools of the University of California (UCLA), the University of Southern California (USC), and later the University of California–Irvine (UCI). In his later years, Jack flew once or twice a month to the University of Nevada Medical School in Las Vegas, NV, to lecture.

In 2004 Jack was the first recipient of the IUGA Lifetime Achievement Award. Now named after him, the Jack Robertson Lifetime Achievement Award is presented each year by AUGS to an outstanding physician.

As part of my McLaughlin Travelling Fellowship program, I started a fellowship under Jack Robertson at LAC-USC Medical Center in July 1975 [1]. Before this, I had already completed training in Europe: with Axel Ingelman Sundberg in Stockholm, with Peter Donker at the University of Leiden in The Netherlands, with Richard Turner-Warwick in London (UK), with Eric Glen and David Rowan in Scotland, and in Africa with Reginald and Catherine Hamlin in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Two of my mentors in Toronto, Goran Enhorning and Ted Morgan, suggested that I spend time with Jack, who had pioneered the development of the 0° female cystourethroscope. Jack had told me that he worked at LAC-USC, but he did not tell me that he only came down once a week and that his private practice was in Santa Ynez. When

Jack came down to southern California, his teaching was practical, filled with years of experience, sensible, and outstanding. We treated many complicated cases (e.g., recurrent fistulas in women sent from Mexico for treatment). At that time, Jack had a relationship with Browne Corporation, and he and Janice were organizing weekend courses in urogynecology for gynecologists and urologists. Jack recruited me as his teaching assistant.

Jack's interpersonal skills were his greatest asset. In the era of twentieth-century medicine, expertise on the female pelvis was full of "holes" and not the "whole pelvis" and territorial turf. Jack understood the importance of comprehensive female pelvic health and pioneered the concept of treating the "whole" pelvis, successfully bringing urologists, gynecologists, and colorectal surgeons to the same table for meaningful, collegial, collaborative dialogue. It was these "people skills" that enabled Jack to work with Axel to create IUGA and to work with the other pioneers who founded AUGS.

Throughout his professional and personal career, Jack was aided by Janice—his better half—who was his artist, meeting coordinator, and far more than just his "right-hand woman". For those reasons, she was bestowed the title of Mother of Urogynecology by me at the IUGA meeting in Toronto in 1994.

Everyone who had the privilege of knowing Jack will appreciate what an honor they had. For those of you who did not know him personally, I hope you can now understand what a global legacy he has left for everyone.

References

1. Robertson JR (2011) My mentors in urogynecology. *Int Urogynecol J* 22:1209–1210